

Witchcraft and ‘Bitchcraft’: A Portrayal of the Witch Character in *American Horror Story: Coven*

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Abstract

American Horror Story: Coven (2013-2014) is an original TV series created by Ryan Murphy and Brian Falchuk that revolves around a group of witches who dwell in a private school owned and run by Cordelia. This teacher is the prototype of the good witch. She is also the daughter of Fiona Goode, the so-called ‘supreme’ among the witches’ community, meaning she is the most talented and powerful witch alive. This character, played on screen by Jessica Lange, is the most vivid embodiment of the evil mother that haunts traditional fairy tales: she is egocentric and her ultimate goal is to keep her physical appearance intact. Undoubtedly the universe within the series appears markedly feminine and overtly addresses gender issues which range from the traditional relation that femininity has with patriarchy to the way female characters are depicted in fairy tales. Within this framework, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how gender issues are dealt with in the series, namely the relation between peers, the bond between mothers and daughters, and the ways femininity develops taking into account the obstacles brought by the counter-power of patriarchy. In this context, it will be challenging to explore how the witch characters are grounded on female stereotypes and clichés, and how they express female anxieties and fears that have roots in the past and continue to afflict them in the present. This analysis also aims at exploring how the traditional fairy tale conventions are manipulated, parodied and subsequently integrated into the filmic narrative. In an original fashion, we can say that *American Horror Story: Coven* engenders an eerie atmosphere, offering the spectator a universe where the horrors of the past meet the terrors of the present in a harmonious and dark account.

Key Words: *American Horror Story: Coven*, witches, evil, fairy tale, gender issues, mothers, daughters, patriarchy, feminism.

1. The Season of the Witch

In an interview given by Ryan Murphy to *Entertainment Weekly*, his words let slip that the next subject of *American Horror Story*’s new season would be related to the feminine universe, as he affirmed, ‘I...feel like for the third version I want to do something that’s a little bit more ‘evil glamour’.’¹ Undeniably the series revolves around feminine issues, focusing upon the struggle of women against the repressive structures of patriarchy and revisiting the plots and characters that dwell upon fairy tales. Given this context, this paper sets out to explore how the series

tackles gender-related issues, highlighting the relation between peers, the bond between mothers and daughters, and the ways in which the concept of femininity develops throughout the narrative, considering all the adversities that the witches must confront in order to assert their power. This reflection will also be extended so as to examine how the series parodies and deconstructs the traditional fairy tale conventions, deliberately conveying a certain feminist subtext.

*American Horror Story: Coven*² takes us to New Orleans, where a boarding school for young witches, Miss Robichaux's Academy, is located. According to the storyline, the witches left Salem and took refuge in that city. The action of the series basically revolves around the school and its witches, who work to develop their inherited talents. Interestingly, there is a peculiarity to each one of them. Zoe suffers from a genetic malady, but is endowed with many powers; Nan has Down syndrome and is clairvoyant; Madison is a superficial and vain teen film star who is very good at telekinesis; Queenie is a black girl capable of inflicting pain upon others by hurting herself, like a living voodoo doll. Cordelia is the school's headmistress, and she devotes herself to her herbs and potions. Not far away, Marie Laveau, an immortal voodoo priestess, runs a hairdresser's salon. Outside the city, in the swamps, lives Misty Day, a hippie witch said to have the power of resurgence, which means that she can bring to life anyone who has died.

All appears calm, until the day Fiona Goode, Cordelia's mother, arrives in town. She is the so-called Supreme, the most powerful witch alive. She is narcissistic, self-centered, sassy and charming. With her health increasingly deteriorating, she suspects that a younger Supreme is about to emerge, so she is poised to do everything to avoid that. The fact that she seeks eternal youth and beauty makes her the living embodiment of the Evil Queen of Snow White's tale.

2. Tales of Evil Mothers

AHS-Coven depicts the mother as an authoritarian figure who wishes to exert unlimited power upon her offspring. In this vein, maternal figures appear as physically and emotionally abusive. Joan Ramsey, the religious fanatic lady that lives with her son in the mansion next to the witches' academy, is a paradigmatic example. In one of the scenes, she forces her son to take an enema so as to purge his body of evil. At one point she asserts her authority over Luke, yelling, 'I made you and I can unmake you.'³ Eventually, she asphyxiates her son while he is at the hospital.

Fiona, whose last name is ironically 'Goode,' plays the role of the evil mother, often downplaying her daughter's qualities, insinuating that she is weak and naïve. Actually, at one point, she admits to having been a bad mother all of her life, showing some remorse, 'I was a horrible mother. And I regret it.'⁴

Kyle's mother is also shown to be a sexual molester. In 'The Replacements,' the boy that Zoe and Madison have 'built' is left at his house, where he encounters his mother. Shockingly, the viewer is confronted with the fact that the boy's

mother used to engage in sexual activity with her son. Once at the house, the boy recalls this abusive behavior and kills her, in a violent manner. However, and despite being freed from his biological mother, Kyle is later on abused by Madison, who is always asserting her power over him, claiming the supremacy of a maternal role as she was one of the boy's creators. Emulating his biological mother, she similarly uses him for sexual pleasure.

In a metaphorical dimension, Spalding, Fiona's loyal butler, can also be seen as a male 'mother' to his dolls. Interestingly, this character is reminiscent of the silent serial killer in Hitchcock's paradigmatic film *Psycho*. In one of the scenes, he appears dressed as a woman (or a doll) in a rocking chair, holding one of the dolls that belongs to his vast collection. There are also other traits liable to link him to a feminine nature: he, like the classical figure of the Victorian madwoman, dwells in an attic. Apart from that, he has also been deprived of speech, becoming incapable of uttering a word due to a self mutilation inflicted in order to prevent him from telling the truth about Fiona's deeds in the past.⁵

On the other hand, the character of the traditional evil stepmother is given a twist here for Myrtle Snow loves Cordelia and has been a real mother to her, since the girl was left in her care by a too rebellious and narcissistic Fiona, who had always been interested in living her life with no burdens attached. This explains why the headmistress sweetly refers to her as 'Auntie Myrtle.'

Amidst this dystopian world of mothers, Cordelia appears as the one female character that would have the potential to be a good mother. Although having been informed by the doctor that she cannot bear children, the wish to have a baby haunts her in 'Boy Parts.' Despite the overwhelming pain she feels, she adamantly refuses to resort to magic to fulfill her wishes. In the episode, she notes, 'If I start using magic to fulfill my every whim, then I'm just Fiona... This kind of magic-- it's dark. It's about life and death, and I don't want to play God.'⁶ Thus, she is well aware of the fact that if she summons the dark powers to fulfill her whims, she will be copying her mother, and that is something that she abhors.

Mothers are given a serious dark portrayal, one that is reminiscent of Gothic fiction. In fact, all the potential mothers appear to be harmful or incapable: Marie Laveau ends up sacrificing her own daughter to pay for the immortality bestowed upon her by Papa Legba, a demonic spirit summoned from hell; Delphine Lalaurie is presented as a hideous woman (racist and serial killer) and a monstrous mother as she does not hesitate when it comes to inflicting torture upon her own daughters.

In 'Boy Parts,' Madison likewise rants about her mother whom she accuses of having robbed her of her childhood, by turning her into a child-actor, 'My mother put me to work ever since I could talk. I hated it. It's hard to stop when you're the only one in your family making money, you know.' When she is asked about her relationship with her mother, she replies, 'The last time I saw her, she snorted half my coke, and then let the cops bust me for it. She's a selfish bitch.'⁷

Noteworthy is the fact that the feminine powers of giving birth are engaged in a constant dialogue with death. This feature is enhanced through the character of Misty Day, a witch who has the power of bringing back the dead. The viewer, however, is not allowed any clues as to the fact that she can or cannot bear children, which eventually turns her into a kind of morbid mother.

3. Happy Endings and Damaged Prince Charmings

Male characters are relegated to a secondary plan in the series whose action is primarily concerned with female issues. For instance, the witch hunters, who hide behind the brand of a wealthy company, Delphi, seem to pose no effective threat to the coven. Actually, Fiona and Marie Laveau lure them into a meeting, and convince the Axeman (a serial killer who is in love with Fiona) to kill the main administrator, who happens to be the father of Cordelia's husband, Hank.

Although they are not assigned the main role, male characters carry a subversive power within the narrative.

Despite the fact that Spalding cannot speak a word, he indulges in his own private universe where he is the puppeteer of his dolls. From a metaphorical perspective, the dolls operate as a surrogate for the women/witches he cannot control. Hence, he has built his own sacred haven in the attic where he can fully engage in fantasies of domination and nurturing, a universe where the females are forever in a submissive position, being mere objects at his disposal.

On the other hand, Kyle seems to be the effigy of male passivity, being forever imprisoned in a vicious circle of female abuse. Eventually, by integrating the coven, he becomes somehow vulnerable and dependent on a set of 'mothers' who are ready to give him orders and treat him as if he were an object, an authentic 'Ken doll.'

Surprisingly, in the end, it is Cordelia that makes a deal with the Axeman, convincing him to kill her mother. Interestingly, the sequence of events seem to play out as a reversed version of the story of 'Snow White': here it is the 'apparently helpless' female young heroine who hires the 'hunter' to kill the evil mother. Ultimately, Fiona succumbs, victim of axe strokes, and lands in her personal hell. Ironically, her 'happily ever after' unfolds as a kind of pastoral nightmare: a cabin in the woods, where she is doomed to live in domestic bliss with the Axeman. In a symbolic plan, this means that she is trapped inside a male character's fantasy. By a sudden twist of faith, the woman who has always repudiated any idea of domesticity, and has always run away from steady romance and commitment, becomes locked up in a sort of forced marriage.

As for Cordelia, she learns that she must put her coven first. She realises that the prince charming that came along her way, Hank Foxx, was a mere witch hunter and she has to deal with all this deception and betrayal in front of the assembly of witches. So, by filing for the divorce, she reinstates her independence from Hank and keeps the school protected from any harmful male presence.

It is relevant to note that the prince charming appears depicted in a manner that calls to our mind an artificial construct. In ‘Boy Parts,’ Madison playing the part of a pragmatic female Viktor Frankenstein, explains to Zoe the easiest way of bringing back the mangled body of her deceased beloved Kyle: ‘We take the best boy parts, we attach them to Kyle’s head and we build the perfect boyfriend... All we have to do is follow this recipe.’⁸ This implies that only by choosing the best parts will the girls ever manage to build the perfect male partner, thus turning this task, in real life, virtually impossible.

4. ‘Goode’ Cordelia

According to feminist theories that have dwelled upon fairy tales, female characters that don’t conform to the rules are usually punished within the narrative. In this sense, *AHS-Coven* carries out the same lessons that strongly contribute to a kind of hegemonic nature intrinsic to the fairy tale. Thus, Madison’s promiscuity is punished when she is gang raped at a party she attends with Zoe. In turn, Zoe’s curse dictates that all the boys she becomes intimate with are poised to die. The young witch is actually the victim of a genetically transmitted curse that turns her into a sort of black widow. We are left to guess if her relationship with Kyle really works out because he is already dead, and hence cannot die again as a result of that affliction.

As previously seen, Fiona is also disciplined by virtue of her erratic sexual behavior.

In conclusion, we can say that a kind of punishment awaits those female characters who do not behave like proper girls, a fact which showcases an attempt to regulate and to curb female behavior. In this sense, Maria Tatar alerts us to the consequences of non-conformity to the strict models entrenched in a patriarchal society. The author asserts that fairy tales seek,

to provide (in however misguided and coercive a fashion) models of successful acculturation while supplying women with what conventional wisdom perceived as the correct program for making and preserving a good marriage. Women who did not accommodate themselves to these patterns would indeed be playing with fire.⁹

Indeed, from the beginning, the series shows that happy endings aren’t allowed for these witches: Marie Laveau’s lover, Bastien, is turned into the mythic Minotaur and imprisoned by Delphine LaLaurie to be subjected to her tortures. Bastien eventually assimilates his monstrous nature and later on rapes Queenie, proving him to be no role model for a charming prince; Luke, the boy next door, is murdered by his mother, thwarting his chances of being happy with Nan; as for

Zoe, she dies in the last episode of the series, putting an end to her romance with the fragmentary 'Franken-Kyle.'

Indeed, fairy tales are alluded to and parodied throughout *AHS-Coven*. After being murdered by Fiona, Madison is buried in a kind of wood box resembling a coffin only to be later revived, emulating Snow White's resurrection. In 'Boy Parts,' in a scene that evokes 'Sleeping Beauty,' she is drunk and half asleep lying on a bed while the boys at the fraternity party rape her. Adopting a critical and deconstructive perspective, the series thus transforms Snow White into a living zombie and turns the awakening of Sleeping Beauty into a misogynistic fantasy of rape.

Moreover, Madison appears depicted as the living embodiment of the shallow fairy tale princess, as she sees her female power depending on her physical beauty. Mimicking a kind of modernized version of a princess, she complains about the emptiness she feels inside and talks about using drugs and suffering from bulimia so as to avoid the world's pressure. In 'Protect the Coven,' she is called the worst kind of Hollywood cliché.

The feminine rivalry that the fairy tale always hints at is also a focus of attention in the series. In fact, there is animosity between young witches, between white witches and black witches and between mothers and daughters. As Patricia Duncker highlights, 'One of the aspects of relationships between women which the fairy-tales allow us to examine and re-create is cruelty, brutality, and hatred of woman against woman. (...) Relationships between women in the tales are always based on rivalry and competition.'¹⁰ However, those are moments where identification between them is likewise suggested. For instance, when Fiona realises that her daughter tried to orchestrate her death, compelling her to commit suicide, she remarks, 'What you and your girls demonstrated last night was real grit. I finally have hope for the future of this coven. And you, my dear, I'm so proud of. You really are my daughter.'¹¹

A clear manifestation of female togetherness takes place when Fiona and Marie Laveau realise that only together can they defeat the threat posed by the witch hunters. In 'The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks,' Fiona reclaims the power of a feminine sisterhood so as to eradicate the male threat posed by their historical enemies, the witch hunters. Therefore, and despite all the feminine dissidence, it is in their union that force resides and, as historic survivors, they need to come to terms with that.

Another cliché explored in the series concerns the nature of the protagonist of the story. Cordelia, the one who displays the right behavior and who has always been maternity-inclined, is poised to be the next Supreme, which means, that, in the end, she is acknowledged as the heroine of the story. As Karen Rowe remarks, fairy tales '...glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues.'¹² Indeed, she is shy, discrete and willing to sacrifice herself for the well-being of the coven. At one point, Myrtle tells her, 'You've got a lovely

personality, and you are always well groomed.’¹³ In this sense, Cordelia proves to fit the profile of the female heroine proclaimed by Rowe. It appears that the young woman’s conformity with the conventional role of femininity proclaimed by the fairy tale has been rewarded. As a matter of fact, with no prince charming emerging in the horizon, she remains in her position as headmistress of the boarding school, recalling the spinster of the Victorian epoch.

5. The Awakening

It is relevant to point out that *AHS-Coven* has indeed a feminist subtext. The emblematic re-gendering of the biblical Last Supper scene in the last episode, when the witches are together at the table talking about the procedures of the ultimate test to elect the next Supreme, the so-called ‘Seven Wonders’ challenge, enlightens it.

In the last episode, and after all male characters have been eradicated from the scene, we are left with a cleaner, almost sanitized version of the school. The space appears to be whiter, cleansed, strongly resembling the atmosphere of a hospital. The sensation we get is that the academy and all its feminine space has been the object of a purge.

It is also implied that the influence of the fairy tale upon the construction of passive feminine role models is not a *fait accompli*. Cordelia’s words seem to convey this idea, as she states, ‘When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child. But when I became a woman, I put aside childish things.’¹⁴ Her discourse underscores a breach between the world of a child’s fairy tales and the world of a grown-up female. Clearly, fairy tales are here dismissed as a child’s fantasy. In the real world, women cannot waste time waiting for a prince charming; they have to be independent and responsible. The power and the discernment lie within oneself and one has to be able to awaken it. When, in an act of revenge, the witch hunters turn Cordelia blind in the sequence of an attack with sulfuric acid, she discovers that she has gained a second-vision. In this light, the awakening of her dormant eyes is also a wake-up call for her personal ‘I’. She realises that she was given a role to play. She has to step forward and impose her will so as to save the school and ensure the survival of the young witches. That is when she acknowledges that her mother constitutes a real threat, and therefore, must be killed. Otherwise, it will be the witches, the candidates to become the next Supreme, who will vanish, one by one. Thus, when Cordelia decides to ‘see’ and assume the control of the academy, she really takes a stand as an independent woman, thereby cutting the umbilical cord of fear and insecurity that linked her to her mother.

By adopting a bittersweet approach with regard to the feminine universe, *AHS-Coven* engages in the construction of a post-feminist space, which, according to Rachel Moseley, constitutes a paradoxical *lieu*¹⁵ liable of accommodating feminist

ideals of empowerment and emancipation together with some conservative conventions that characterize the traditional fairy tale.

Notes

¹ 'American Horror Story Season 3 to Feature Evil Glamour Ryan Murphy Teases,' last modified 3 January 2013, Viewed 10 March 2013, <http://www.tvfanatic.com/2013/01/american-horror-story-season-3-to-feature-evil-glamour-ryan-murp/>.

² Further references to *American Horror Story: Coven* will appear as *AHS-Coven* in the text.

³ *American Horror Story: Coven*. Season 3, Episode no. 8, 'The Sacred Taking,' first broadcast 4 Dec. 2013 by FX, Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

⁴ *American Horror Story: Coven*, Season 3, Episode no. 2, 'Boy Parts,' first broadcast 16 Oct. 2013 by FX, Directed by Michael Rymer.

⁵ In fact, Fiona has killed the previous Supreme, in order to take her place.

⁶ *American Horror Story: Coven*, Season 3, Episode no. 2, 'Boy Parts,' first broadcast 16 Oct. 2013 by FX, Directed by Michael Rymer.

⁷ 'Boy Parts' (3.02).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Maria Tatar, *Off with Their Heads: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96.

¹⁰ Patricia Duncker, *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 152.

¹¹ 'The Sacred Taking' (3.08).

¹² Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 239.

¹³ *American Horror Story: Coven*. Season 3, Episode no. 10, 'The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks,' first broadcast 8 Jan. 2013 by FX, Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

¹⁴ *American Horror Story: Coven*. Season 3, Episode no. 13, 'The Seven Wonders,' first broadcast 29 Jan. 2013 by FX, Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

¹⁵ Rachel Moseley, 'Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender and Magic in Teen Film and Television' *Screen* 43.4 (2002): 418.

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———. Season 3, Episode no. 3, 'The Replacements,' first broadcast 23 Oct. 2013 by FX. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 4, 'Fearful Pranks Ensur,' first broadcast 30 Oct. 2013 by FX. Directed by Michael Uppendahl.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 5, 'Burn Witch.Burn!,' first broadcast 6 Nov. 2013 by FX. Directed by Jeremy Podeswa.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 6, 'The Axeman Cometh,' first broadcast 13 Nov. 2013 by FX. Directed by Michael Uppendahl.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 7, 'The Dead,' first broadcast 20 Nov. 2013 by FX. Directed by Bradley Buecker.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 8, 'The Sacred Taking,' first broadcast 4 Dec. 2013 by FX. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 9, 'Head,' first broadcast 11 Dec. 2013 by FX. Directed by Howard Deutch.

———.Season 3, Episode no. 10, 'The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks,' first broadcast 8 Jan. 2013 by FX. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 11, 'Protect the Coven,' first broadcast 15 Jan. 2013 by FX. Directed by Bradley Buecker.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 12, 'Go to Hell,' first broadcast 22 Jan. 2013 by FX. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

———. Season 3, Episode no. 13, 'The Seven Wonders,' first broadcast 29 Jan. 2013 by FX. Directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon.

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